

A Christian Guide on Premarital Counseling

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INTRODUCTION

Those who have studied marriage from a purely scientific point of view, admit that marital harmony is in a state of disintegration. Never in the history of the human race has there been more written on the subject of marriage. Nor has the home as a social unit been the focus of so many scientific inquiries. Marriage counselors are numerous, and child guidance clinics are on the increase. Knowing these things, would lead one to believe that problems in marriage must surely be decreasing year by year.

But such is not the case. Dr. K. E. Appel and Dr. Martin Goldberg both from the Department of Psychiatry, in the School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, contend that the American family is in crisis. They give several reasons.

First, they believe the family is fragmented; that its members do not hold together as a unit any longer than circumstances compel them to do so. Second, they believe that today's family is rootless, with no long sustained ties and traditions that stabilize as well as bind. They say also that every member of the family is to a certain extent uncertain and/or unhappy with their role. Wives are not certain they really want to be wives and mothers, husbands are not sure they want to be husbands and fathers,

and children are not given the opportunity to experience true child life. Then, too, communication between family members tends to be sparse, strained, and static ridden, and with a breakdown in communications, comes a deficiency in closeness or intimacy. Many of the responsibilities that used to belong to the home have been usurped by other institutions in our culture, the school, the clubs, and even the church.¹

For this reason, this paper is written. I feel that an "ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure" is an appropriate approach to a healthy relationship for a marriage beginning.

My purpose is to offer practical guidelines and suggestions drawn from some current psychological theories and traditional Christian principles. I will make no attempt to cover all of the subject matter pertaining to marriage relationships. Volumes of information are beyond my knowledge. However, there are some things I want to say specifically, in the areas of Communication, Finance, Sexuality and Love, to be very important subjects for couples to know and understand before entering into a marriage arrangement.

Communication in a marriage will be examined by looking at the way couples send and receive messages between themselves. The problems of communication will be discussed by pointing to certain behavior that cause communication difficulties. Positive communication skills are presented in order to show how good communication habits can be learned and practiced.

The economic issue in marriage is introduced to show

how the misuse or abuse of money can become a serious threat to marital harmony. Organizing a budget, and a method of keeping it in order will be discussed, along with budgeting fundamentals. Some practical principles on how to purchase and how not to purchase will finalize this section.

Sexual compatibility and how it can be achieved in a marital relationship will be discussed in terms of the purpose for sexual relationship, the importance of sex in marriage and how to obtain genuine sexual fulfillment in the marital bond.

Love is the foundation in a marital relationship that is basic for assuring harmony in the areas thus mentioned. Some attempts at giving a basic definition, along with outlining some healthy characteristics for love, and suggestions on how each partner can develop and strengthen their love for each throughout the endurance of their marriage.

COMMUNICATION IN MARRIAGE

Communication is recognized by marriage counselors as the number one problem or cause of problems in marital relationships. If a couple is able to communicate, they can effectively deal with any problem they face; but if they do not communicate, any thing can quickly become a problem.

The importance of communication cannot be minimized. It is an absolute "must" in relationships at all levels and in all areas of life. Communication has been described as the glue that holds a relationship together. In no relationship, is communication more important than in marriage. It has been said that marriage is one long conversation, hopefully seasoned with understanding.²

Lou Beardsley stressed the importance of communication in marriage when she wrote; "communication is the lifeblood of a marriage, without it the relationship becomes terminally ill and eventually dies". She added "most divorces occur because somewhere along the line, communication has broken down between marriage partners."³

Because communication is so vitally important in your marital relationship it must be persistently and patiently practiced. Good communication is a skill and like any skill it must be continually used and improved or else it will

deteriorate. The importance of communication in your marriage, along with some dangers and essentials in the communication process is what this part of the paper addresses.

SENDING AND RECEIVING MESSAGES

Communication is the process of sending and receiving messages. That is a very simple definition, and having given it, I must add that the definition is about all that is simple in communication. The complexity of the communication process is indicated in the definition given by H. Norman Wright: "communication is a process (either verbally or non-verbally) of sharing information with another person in such a way that he/she understands what you are saying. Talking and listening and understanding are all involved in the process of communication".⁴

The practice of communication includes any kind of thought, feeling or information passed between people. It is the process of sharing with another your ideas, interests, feelings and knowledge in a manner that makes it possible for the receiver to understand the message being sent.

It is frequently stated that there are three general means of communicating a message. These are verbal, non-verbal and symbolic. The first employs words as the vehicles of communication. The non-verbal method involves what is often called "body language". By the way one sits, stands or speaks in certain tones can be expressions of body language. It is communication by means of gestures, posture or facial

expressions. Symbolic communication is the process of sending a message by something you do.. Gifts are perhaps the most obvious method of symbolic communication, but they are by no means the only type. Non-verbal and symbolic communication play an important place in your marriage.

Having defined the process of communication rather simply and identified the means by which it works, we shall now look at the complexity of this process. Four facts need to be understood by couples concerning this involved process.

First, the activity of communication ranges all the way from a simple "Good morning", to the not-so-simple sharing of your innermost feelings and desires. John drakeford identified seven different levels of communication.⁵ These are: the greeting level; the chit-chat level; the ambivalent level ("some people give off two messages, the acceptable one and the real one"); the visceral level (the venting of hostility or frustration); the tacit or non-verbal level; the self-disclosure level; and the sexual level.

Second, for understanding to take place in the communication process, there must be more than just a common language. Certainly, one has communication problems if the person uses a language the hearer does not understand, but communication involves more than just the words used. It also includes values, attitudes, thought patterns and perceptions which give different shades of meaning to the words used.

Third, understanding as an essential in communication involves listening. Many people are often guilty of tuning the other person out in conversation. Communication experts

say that the average person receives about sixteen hundred messages daily but acts only on about twelve of them.⁶ The others are tuned out.

Listening to your partner is one of the greatest things you can do for him or her. The indictment "you are not paying attention", often means far more than simply stating that you are not listening to what the other is saying. It may well mean you are tuning out my personhood, my presence, you are saying, I am not important.

Fourth, communication also requires response. Good communication is not a monologue in which one person does all the talking and the other listens. It is a dialogue—a channel through which messages are being sent and received by both participants. Dwight Small wrote that "dialogue takes place when one's very being confronts the being of the other, and when the truth of one life confronts the truth of the other".⁷

An additional word must be added about communication as an exercise in sending and receiving. It is that communication is a skill that must be learned. It is not a process you bring to marriage ready made. Communication is a learned skill, and good communication is learned through trial and error. It is a skill which you must daily work to improve and never cease to use. Both partners will go through a lot of changes in which there will be new or different thought patterns, perceptions, attitudes, etc. These facts demand continued communication throughout the duration of the marital relationship.

DIFFICULTIES IN COMMUNICATING

There is no such thing as a lack of communication. Instead, there is only inadequate or incorrect communication. People are constantly sending and receiving messages. The couple who sits in stony silence may well be communicating a great deal to each other. The problem in communication is that people often garble the message in its transmission and misinterpret it as they receive it.

David Knox wrote that "something is always communicated, either through words or behavior. When a husband and wife are together, it is impossible for them not to communicate something, each to the other".⁸ John Drakeford says again "that a husband and wife may be exchanging as many as fifty pieces of information per second while they are together"⁹. The problem with their communication is not the lack of it, but that it is often inadequate or incorrect.

Tragically, many married couples drift into poor communication habits. In their courtship days they were so anxious to talk to each other and know what each felt, liked and wanted. But in marriage they settle down and take each for granted. A chain reaction is set in motion which not only results in poor communication, but which can easily deal a death blow to their relationship. This chain reaction is expressed in three words: assume, anticipate and apathy.

The first chain reaction is when the couple begins to assume what the other is thinking. When two people live together a long time they get to know each other's minds and needs to a certain degree. But one person never fully knows what another is thinking; often real needs are concealed behind secondary or superficial ones. Thus, one is on thin ice when each begin to assume with supposed accuracy what is going on inside the other.

Having assumed what each is thinking or what each wants, you then anticipate what he or she will say or do. This is an exercise in second guessing. Virginia Satir wrote, "so often partners seem so sure of each other's reactions that they do not hear or see reactions that do not fit their expectations."¹⁰

The last stage in this reaction of communication difficulty is apathy. This means that since a person thinks he or she knows what is going on inside another individual, and anticipates what will be said or done, they finally get to the place where they really do not care what the other person thinks or feels. A relationship can be maintained as long as two people are working at understanding.

GOOD COMMUNICATION FACTORS

There are five essential factors that couples can use to establish and maintain good communication channels according to Hardy R. Denham, they are Truth, Trust, Time, Tact and Tone.¹¹

The essentialness of truth in communication is obvious. It is impossible for your mate to know and to understand the other if the signals and messages you send are not really representative of your true feelings and thoughts.

Communication demands a bond of trust to communicate, at the ultimate level of sharing one must trust the receiver. If there is no trust there will be no real sharing of personal feeling and desires.

Many mates fail or refuse to open up to their partners. In many cases, it is because they fear that what they say will not be properly received. It may be that they are afraid that what they say will be held against them at a later date. All of this speaks of lack of trust.

Good communication in marriage demands that husbands and wives have faith in each other. Such trust does not demand that they always agree with each other's feeling or thoughts; however, these feelings and thoughts must be recognized as genuine. This trust also demands that they handle with utmost care the soul that is laid open in honest communication.

Time is an essential in good communication for three reasons. The most obvious reason is that it takes time to open up to another and share what you really think or feel.

The second reason why time is important in communication is that allowance must be made for feedback or response. Communication is a two-way street. It is a channel for receiving as well as sending messages. Time must be allowed for both. In some situations, the time allowed for response must be more than the time needed for sending. The receiver

needs to have time to digest and evaluate the message before responding.

Finally, time is an essential factor in communication because the right time should be chosen for the sending of some messages. There is the familiar saying "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak".¹² Time is an important factor in communication. Couples need to make arrangements to have time together. This may mean making an appointment to talk. It may mean agreeing in advance to turn off the television at a certain time, or making plans to get away from all possible distractions and interruptions on a regular basis.

The necessity for tact in communication has already been indirectly stressed in emphasizing the need to choose the right time for some communication. However, much needs to be said about this important factor.

Both you and your spouse have your areas of great sensitivity. Dealing carelessly with these is much like touching a sensitive nerve; it is sure to trigger a reaction. That reaction can quickly lead to some undesired consequences. Couples need to learn what these sensitive areas are and stay away from them if possible, or deal with them carefully if it is not possible.

Tact in communication is the art of saying the right thing at the right time and in the right way. That right way includes building a person up rather than tearing them down. Tact also means keeping silent about things one knows is bound to trigger an undesired response on the part of your mate.

What one says, in a sense is not as important as how one says it. The tone of one's voice in speaking can actually negate or cancel the message spoken. Couples often say things to each other that send one message while the way they say it communicates an entirely different message.

Communication is such a broad and comprehensive subject that any treatment of it leaves much to be said. However, couples need to be reminded of the importance of good communication in all life's relationships, and especially in marriage. It must also be remembered that communication is a skill, and as is true with any skill it is one you need to work at constantly to improve and perfect.

THE ECONOMIC ISSUE IN MARRIAGE

Money ranked second in a recent survey as the most frequent problem for couples in their twenties.¹³ The study showed that "counselors report an increase in the number of conflicts over money, and they blame the rocky state of our national economy".¹⁴ Similar studies show the same. George H. Gallup reported that money was the chief source of quarreling between husbands and wives. Joyce Brothers stated that "american couples argue far more about money than any other issue ". Richard L. Strauss wrote that it has been estimated "that at least sixty percent of all married couples have had some degree of conflict over money".¹⁵

The problem of having too much month left over at the end of the money can put a real strain on the husband-wife relationship. Financial problems in marriage have been around along time. In one sense, the strain related to financial difficulties can be traced back to the first marriage in history. Adam and Eve never had to stretch a pay check, meet monthly installments, or deal with past due notices, but the desire to acquire got them into a lot of trouble. That desire in modern times has been intensified in a material way by the abundance of products readily available in our consumer market, plus the attractive and alluring advertising techniques of Madison avenue. These, coupled with easy credit and buy-now, pay-later plans have made it very easy for couples to find themselves oweing more than they

make. The obvious consequence is strain and tension that detrimentally affects the couple at virtually every level of their relationship.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon every couple to sit down together and take a long hard look at how much they have to spend, what should come first in the disbursement of the funds available, and then decide what they really need as opposed to what is a non-essential luxury.

FINANCIAL IMPRUDENCE

There is a great deal of financial imprudence practiced in many marriages. Much of this imprudence is caused by the prevailing wrong idea about the importance of money. Our society, with its materialistic orientation and concepts, keeps money before us as the number one priority in life. People are measured in terms of their earning ability and we often think that the person who has more is worth more. These false concepts have led millions of people to put making money as the goals of their lives. This wrong attitude about money has led many to arrive at two equally wrong conclusion. The first is that if we only had more money all our problems would be solved. However, there are folks who have millions, who would be quick to say that money is not a magic potion that cures all ills.

The second erroneous conclusion that results from the wrong attitude about money is that it is the source of

happiness. People have said "I would be happy if I just had all the money I want". But having a lot of money has proven only to have the ability to be miserable in a better part of town.

The second major concern for financial imprudence is the folly of allowing money to control your marriage. It has been said that money is a good servant but a terrible master. It will become your master if you put it first and do not control it.

Even though there are a number of ways by which money can become a controlling factors in your marriage, there are two definite ways you need to guard against. If you fail to do so in either of these ways the result may be that you will be a slave and money will be your master. These two ways are greed and excessive debt.

Greed can be traced back to the first married couple. Eve looked at the forbidden tree and desired it's fruit. Even though she and her husband had the whole garden and all the fruit trees to enjoy, that was not enough for Eve. She wanted more, and with greedy grasping, She along with her husband took more.¹⁶

The same principle operates today. More and more things are readily available to us. These are often attractive and alluring. Furthermore, there is never a shortage of voices saying, "go ahead, take it. You deserve the best. Do not deny yourself". Before you know it this desire to acquire will become a consuming power in your life

that results in a constant state of discontent with what you have. Money then becomes your master.

The second way that money takes control of your marriage is by excessive debt. Money takes control in the form of an intolerable, oppressive debt when your grasp for things exceeds your ability to pay for them. You are in serious trouble when your outgo exceeds your income.

MANAGEMENT OF MONEY

Managing your money is the key to seeing to it that your money does not control you and your marriage. Robert Hasting wrote, "the ultimate aim of money management is not to save, but to build our spending around healthy goals".¹⁷ Whether money is your servant or master is determined by whether or not you manage it. It may be fairly simple for a single person to handle his or her finances. But when there are two of you the process can become complicated.

Having stated that money management is the key in determining whether you will control your money or be controlled by it; I must add that in order to manage your finances properly some major decisions must be made.

First, recognize that God comes first with your money. That recognition is based on the fact that God is the owner of everything and we simply have temporary use of what we have. Putting God first puts money in the proper perspective. The wise man of old observed that the best policy with money is to honor the Lord God with a portion of it.

He wrote, "honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce, then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine".¹⁸ I would add that even though the Bible commands giving, your primary motive for putting God first in the expenditure of your funds should be gratitude for His goodness to you. Furthermore, even though you should not take a legalistic approach to giving in that you expect a "full barn" or a full pocket in return, the fact is that you will be blessed.

Second, plan a household budget and stick to it. A budget is a projection of expenses based on anticipated or known income. It is a plan for meeting your financial obligations and providing for the things you need and want.

A household budget can accomplish several important purposes in the management of your finances. One, it enables you to keep control of your spending. Couples frequently cash their pay checks and then a few days later sit down and try figure out where the money went usually they discover that by not having any means of control they spend some of the precious funds foolishly. By means of a budget you can plan in advance where the money should go. By following that plan you not only know where it went, but you are able to see to it that money is not foolishly spent.

Two, a budget helps you choose a suitable standard of living. Your standard of living must not be chosen on the basis of the standard of your friends. They may have a larger or smaller income than you. When a couple takes

stock of what they have coming in, thus knowing what their spending limit is, they can then plan for the disbursement of funds in line with their resources. This process results in determining a standard of living in keeping with your income. It will keep you from waking up one morning to discover that you are living far beyond your means.

Three, having a budget makes it possible for you to provide for the future, or to purchase something special both of you want. By means of a budget a couple can put some money aside for a rainy day, a special project, or a vacation trip.

In general terms, your budget should have two divisions. The first can be called Fixed Expenses. In this part of the budget you will list items and amount over which you have no control. These include such things as mortgage payments, rent, insurance premiums, etc.

The second division of your budget can be labeled Flexible Expenditures. These are items over which you do exercise control. That is, you can determine how much or how little you will spend for these items. These flexible expenditures will include such items as groceries, utilities, clothing, savings, travel, etc.

The last decision to be made in the matter of money management involves the question of who should control the purse strings, the husband or the wife? This is a point of sharp conflict in many marriages.

There are two errors which need to be pointed out initially. The first is having to do with separate bank

accounts rather than a joint account. The second is dividing the household expenses with the husband paying some out of his salary while the wife is responsible for the others out of her income. Marriage is an exercise in oneness, and should include finances as well as every other area of marital life. Couples are asking for trouble when they take a "yours versus mine" approach to money. Even though each partner should have some pocket money, or an allowance for incidentals, the family treasury should be "ours".

The decision of control is largely taken care of if the two of you together have planned a household budget. When both partners have worked together in developing a budget it really makes little difference who writes the checks. If there is no budget, however, the decision of control becomes a major one. Here, as elsewhere in your marriage the bottom line must be mutuality. Both marital partners are to have input and the final decision about management and all it involves must be mutually made. The decision is not the same for every couple, but it must be a couple's decision.

PRINCIPLES ON PURCHASING

The principles on purchasing are priceless, not only because of what they may eventually save couples in dollars and cents, but also because of the peace of mind that come from knowing you did the right thing.

First, be cautious in buying. There are times when you really should not make the purchase in question. By being

cautious you can be spared the folly of foolish spending that might put you in a financial bind. There are other situations when you will decide to make the purchase and by being cautious you can make certain you are getting the best deal possible.

Two, take time before deciding to buy. You can buy in haste and repent in leisure. It is really frustrating to grab an item off the shelf hastily, fork over the required price, and then on the way home pass by another store where the same item is for sale for less. Furthermore, if you take time to sleep on some purchase involving a major expense you may wake up to realize that the item is not something you really want or need, at least right then.

Three, shop around. Manufacturers set suggested retail values on their products, but the individual merchant can set his own price. The same article may be on sale in another store for much less. However, do not sacrifice quality for price. A cheaper product can be very attractive, especially when funds are limited, but if it will not last as long it can be more expensive in the long run.

Four, do not be pressured into buying. There is a difference between buying something and being sold something. The first activity indicates individual choice while the second implies pressure. If you have to be sold it may well be that the product in question is one you do not want or need.

Five, before you make a purchase or close a deal, ask yourself. "Do I really need this? Is this something I really

want"? Such questioning as this can be a money-saving exercise, whether the item in question costs one dollar or one thousand dollars. Asking such questions can also save you unnecessary expense when you are living on a very limited income.

The second principle that will help in the issue of buying or not buying is to be content with what you have. I do not mean that you should put up with just anything, especially if you are able to provide something better, but I do mean that you should not live in a state of constant discontent with what you have.

Even though money should not be the most important thing in your marriage it can easily become just that. John C. Howell wrote: "too many couples spend most of their waking hours earning money to purchase more possessions but do not take time to build a better marriage".¹⁹ In the end both lose in spite of all they've gained. To paraphrase a familiar passage of scripture; "what shall it profit a couple if they gain all they want and lose their own marriage".²⁰

It is possible for money, including the pursuit of it and problems with it, can wreck a marriage. Here again the key is how the two of you deal with the matter. In this area, as well as in every area of your life together, your marriage will be what you make of it.

RELATING AND UNDERSTANDING SEXUALITY

Sexual incompatibility is ranked third in a list of the ten most common problems in marriage.²¹ In many modern marriages sex is not a blessing. For many it is a bad scene with undercurrents of frustration, resentment and hostility. In other marriages sex is a routine ritual devoid of real satisfaction and enjoyment. One psychologist stated that "the most common complaint (about sex) is boredom. Couples get used to a habitual love-making routine and quite naturally lose interest".²² Another counselor wrote that "a common complaint of the married is the lack of novelty or creativity in sexual relations".²³

The fact is that God created humans as sexual beings;²⁴ and as sexual beings, you have the possibility and permission to relate intimately and sexually in marriage. Since sex is God's idea, and He approves of our sexuality and the proper expressions of it. What are the purposes of sex in marriage?

First, sex is for proclamation. There is no more beautiful or exciting way for a man and a woman to declare their love for each other than in the "context of sex". "making love" is a common expression for intercourse. Actually, sexual togetherness is not to be an exercise in "making love" but giving love. Making love sounds mechanical. Tragically, that is what sex is for many couples, for it is a duty performed with routine regularity without any tenderness or

affection.

One of our most basic life needs is to love and to be loved. The ultimate human fulfillment of this need is experienced in marriage. In the marital relationship you and your mate are to experience love as both the giver and the recipient. Professor Jon Wilson writes:

"If the spouses love one another and they prove it by trying daily to make each other feel wanted, content, secure, and treasured, their lovemaking will be pleasurable, but very much more besides. They will often experience their sexual intimacy at a special time when they give themselves totally to each other and when they receive the awesome gift of each other as a whole person. Boredom will rarely find a foothold in them for their delight in each other's openness and availability will leave no room for it. What happens between them will reveal and express the depth of the love they show each other in so many other, more ordinary ways throughout their days together. In their lovemaking, they will experience more completely and intensely what they already experience in the ebb and flow of their everyday life. In this special time, each is there for the other totally-body, mind, and heart for no other reason but to express the fullness of their love. So when they come together,²⁵ the true story of their shared love is being told".

Thus God gave us sex for the purpose of proclaiming love. Sex without love makes it simply a biological exercise or an animalistic activity. This purpose of proclaiming love should undergird and be expressed in all the other purposes of sex in marriage.

Second, sex is for pleasure. The unhappiness and frustration experienced by so many couples in their sexual relationship is the exact opposite of what God intends. One of the oldest Biblical commands about marriage reads. "When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or

be charged with any business, he shall be free at home one year to be happy with his wife whom he has taken".²⁶ The phrase, "be happy" can easily be understood to mean the pleasure to be experienced in a sexual relationship.

The ancient Hebrews were far more open than most of us in their approach to the man-woman relationship. They wrote in descriptive details about the pleasurable aspects of a sexual relationship. As an example, consider these words about sexual love "may your fountain be blessed, and you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love"²⁷. One entire book in the Old Testament _Song of Solomon- was written for the purpose of extolling the beauty and pleasures of sexual love.

Furthermore, understand that the pleasure to be experienced in sexual relations is not intended to be one-sided. It is not to be a matter of one partner getting a thrill at the expense of the other. Lou Beardsley, in her book Put Love In Your Marriage, wrote: "somehow, through the years, various old wives tales got started that sex was only for men's enjoyment and the women were simply victims of their husbands animalistic behavior."²⁸ Regrettably, this is the way it is in many marriages and both the husband and the wife are the losers. Women are to experience sexual pleasure also. In fact, according to David Reuben in his book Everything you always wanted to know about Sex but was afraid to ask, says one part of the female sexual anatomy -the clitoris-has no function whatever

other than being the focus of sexual pleasure.²⁹

Third, sex is for possession. One aspect of your becoming one is that each of you belong to the other. This belonging has a physical dimension in that you not only belong to each other in the sense that you have committed yourselves to each other, but in that your very bodies become your mate's property.³⁰ Sexual love is so vital to the Christian marriage that God removes the rights of the individual to control his or her own body.³¹ This purpose of possession is expressed in sexual intercourse as each of you gives your body to the other. You are thereby objectifying the fact that you do belong to each other.

Finally, sex is for procreation. Procreation is mentioned last, not to minimize the importance but because it is the most recognizable purpose for sex. It is by means of sexual intercourse that man/female reproduce themselves. This is also a part of God's plan, for He told the first couple to be fruitful and multiply.³²

This purpose of sex is also mentioned last to emphasize that there are other legitimate purposes. There are some people who accept no purpose for sex other than procreation. J.H. Kellogg, a physician and inventor of corn flakes, wrote a book in which he stated that man demonstrates the depths of his depravity when he engages in intercourse for any reason other than procreation.³³ Sex is for procreation, but couples must acknowledge that procreation is only one of the many enjoyable purposes that sex offers.

IMPORTANCE OF SEX IN MARRIAGE

Sex in marriage is important first of all, because sex is a basic reason for marriage. I am not saying that the reason people should marry is in order to experience sexual satisfaction. The primary motive for marriage should be a love in which two people want to give to each other rather than a desire to get from each other.

We have marriage because we are sexual beings with the ability to relate intimately with members of the opposite sex in a sexual relationship. Ruel Howe said "sex needs marriage and marriage needs sex".³⁴ Thomas Bland put it "man's capacity for sexual communion with the opposite sex makes marriage possible; man's readiness for sexual sin makes marriage necessary"³⁵. Therefore, sex is important because if it was not sex we would not have marriage in the first place.

Second, sex is important in marriage because it determines the kind of marriage you will have. Good sexual relations do not guarantee a good marriage, but poor sexual adjustment can destroy a marriage and will certainly keep it from being a fulfilling and satisfying relationship.

For emphasis, I must repeat this fact, a good sexual adjustment alone does not make a good marriage, but it is necessary if you are going to have a good marriage. Now what and how much constitutes a good sexual relationship for you and your mate is up to the two of you to decide together.

There is no hard and fast rule to follow. Each couple is free to determine what is good for them. The important thing is to mutually determine just what you want and do not want and how much is enough. But it is important for you to do that, and do it mutually.

Third, sex in marriage is important because the husband and wife both have sexual needs. Furthermore, they have every right to express their needs and expect them to be met in their marital relationship. The sexual needs of husbands and wives are not necessarily experienced in the same intensity and usually are not experienced with the same regularity.

A part of the husband's need for sex is physical in that he needs to have periodic sexual release. Males experience an accumulating physiological pressure which demands release. Man is designed that this release is a must for him if he has no physical, emotional or psychological problems.

Also involved in the husband's sexual need is his need to be loved by his wife. Even though it is generally expected that the man is to be the aggressor and initiator in the man-woman relationship, a man needs to know that his wife is excited by him and desires him sexually. She can convey this to him by her responses to his advances, as well as by taking the initiative herself at times. There is nothing in the marriage vow that says a wife has to wait to be wanted. She can become the initiator by letting her husband know that she wants him.

The wife has the need to be loved sexually also. Her

need is not as physically oriented as the man's. Her need is closely related to her emotions. In short, a woman needs to be romanced. George and Margaret Hardisty described a kind of romance in this way:

"Romance is when a man says to a woman 'you're a doll, you're beautiful, you're the only one in the world for me. It's a touch of the hair as you go by..uhh..gently It's when you reach over and squeeze her hand in church. It's helping her on with her coat and opening doors for her. It's when you leave a note on the bathroom mirror or call her two or three times during the week from work, 'just because I was thinking of you: Romance is a gift from you that she wouldn't buy for herself, like a music box or a special tea cup. It's 'unspecial day's gifts like a rose, or a box of pretty soap. Romance is telling her you love her a minimum of once a day. It's taking her out to dinner to a really nice place even if you have to save up your nickels to do it".³⁶

Also, a part of the wife's sexual need is related to her self-esteem. James Dobson has pointed out that low self-esteem is the number one problem with most wives.³⁷ He further stated that one reason why low self-esteem is such a big problem with wives has to do with physical attractiveness. This feeling of low self-esteem can be alleviated to a great degree by husbands. If a husband will be expressive of his love to his wife- meaning verbal affirmations as well as physical attention- she will have little reason for a poor self-image.

There is also a physical side to the wife's sexual need. Even though her sex desires may not be as constant or regular as the man's it may well be as intense. Recent research indicates that the intensity of pleasure and sexual excitement at the moment of climax is about the same for both sexes.³⁸ Furthermore, studies in human sexuality reveal that women "are capable of greater sexual response both in terms of

frequency of intercourse and degree of orgasm".³⁹ Added to this is the fact that the woman's sex drive increases as she grows older.

One additional word needs to be said about the importance of sex in marriage because of our sexual needs. That word is about the possible consequences of failing to meet each other's need. A poor sexual adjustment in marriage does not give husbands and wives permission to seek sexual satisfaction outside the marriage, but it surely does open the door to that possibility. As one satisfied husband put it, "when you have a Cadillac in the garage, how can you be tempted to steal a Volkswagen off the street"?⁴⁰ When one's mate repeatedly denies the other sexually without cause, that mate is virtually inviting the other to find someone else.

SEXUAL FULFILLMENT IN MARRIAGE

Men and women enter marriage with the necessary equipment for a sexual relationship. But using it in a manner that becomes mutually satisfying and fulfilling is a learned process. It has been said that the most important sex organ is the brain. This means that sex is more mental than physical. It also means that for your relationship to be all that God intends requires correct knowledge and understanding.

Sometimes the place to begin this learning process is by unlearning. Many people enter marriage with the wrong information and a lot of misconceptions about sex. What has been learned in street corner "bull sessions" or dormitory

slumber parties is usually far from the truth.

For sex in marriage to be great it must be positive, peaceful and pleasant. By positive I mean that it is to be an expression of love and a desire to give. Even though each of you has your own sexual needs and certainly wants them satisfied, your primary concern should be the needs of your mate. If both of you approach your sexual relationship in this positive manner, neither of you will be the loser.

Then, by peaceful, I mean that sex must be relaxed and unrushed. We live in a hurry-up world in which we often rush around at top speed. But a sexual experience is not to be a hurry-up affair. It is true that a man can become quickly aroused and almost as quickly experience release. But this is not true of a woman. Sexual arousal is a gradual process for her, and after the peak of sexual excitement she wants to be held and further assured of being loved. This requires time.

In addition, the peaceful requirement for great sex also means that it is to be without stress and interruptions. The latter requires making some arrangements, but the former is more difficult to deal with. Neither partner should feel the stress of having to perform in an undesired manner, or of feeling that it is necessary to prove sexual prowess or ability.

Finally, by pleasant, I mean that sex must be mutually enjoyable and satisfying. Does this mean that both mates are to experience a sexual climax, and that simultaneously? No. The simultaneous climax as the height of sexual compatibility

and adjustment is unfounded. Furthermore, a time of loving togetherness can be fulfilling even if neither partner achieves a climax. That is, it can be if both understand that this is not always necessary.

Having identified these three characteristics that can lead to sexual fulfillment, I hasten to point out that these characteristics are the results of right attitudes and activities in effecting a good sexual adjustment.

To begin, couples must learn as much as they can about each other. Understanding your own sexual needs and desires is not the same as understanding your mate's needs and desires. Furthermore, discover the erotically sensitive areas of your mate's body so you will know the places to touch that give the most pleasure. You can learn about your mate in two ways. One is by reading books containing factual information about male and female sexuality. A second way to learn about your mate is by talking to each other openly, and honestly about your sexual feelings and desires. Even though it takes effort to overcome initial shyness, loving your mate should demand this of you.

Second, make your own rules. No two couples are the same. The Bible teaches that the marital bed is undefiled.⁴¹ That would probably mean that whatever a couple wants to do in the expression of their love, and in their desire to give and receive pleasure, is acceptable. There are only two exceptions to that rule. One, you must mutually agree on what you do, and two, neither of you is to be hurt in any way.

Third, allow your mate freedom with your body. After all, the sexual experience involves a physical activity. Allowing body freedom can be a problem for men as well as women. However, it is usually more of a problem with wives. Don Meredith wrote: "It is generally much easier for a man to develop freedom with his body and with his mate's body. Some women are not as free as men sexually. They compare themselves with the youthful, unblemished bodies of models on TV, which results in great insecurity, some women believe that the lower parts of their bodies are extremely unattractive and even unsanitary... yet men, when polled on what part of their wife's body was most attractive, overwhelmingly said the genital area".⁴²

The Bible says that the first family were "naked and not ashamed".⁴³ They were not encumbered by centuries of erroneous negative programming that taught that there is something evil about the body. The ideal in your sexual relationship is to recapture the wonderment and excitement of our first parents - naked but not ashamed.

Fourth, learn how to say, "no", A good rule to live by in marriage is not to say no unless it is necessary. Maybe a wife does not feel the need for sex when her husband makes an advance. When this is the case, the husband should not take advantage of such a willingness on her part by making advances when it is obvious it is not a good time for her.

Finally, never use sex as a reward for "good behavior" or a means of punishment. Sex is an expression of love, not

a right to be earned or a reward to be given. Even though we usually do not feel loving when we are disappointed, and we do want to show appreciation when we are pleased, to use sex as a means of punishment or as a reward definitely cheapens it.

This is not all you can do to make your sex life positive, peaceful and pleasant, but it is a start. If you and your mate will at least start with these ways, you will discover more yourselves, and the discovery will be wonderfully exciting. The key is, it is what you make it. It is up to you to keep your sex life exciting and make the bedroom symbolic of a great blessing in your marriage.

LOVE IN MARRIAGE

DEFINITION ON LOVE

Any attempt to define love is complicated by the fact that the word is used in such a variety of ways. One dictionary lists as many as twenty-five different definitions of the word love. The word is used to describe everything from the highest sacrifice to the most shameful form of lust. Kay K. Arvin wrote about the word: "this poor bear-up, bruised, and beautiful little word is hooked on to a lot of emotions to which it is not even a distant cousin. It is handy because it can add a certain amount of dignity to undignified skullduggery-like personal gratification, the need of one person to possess another, physical desire, even convenience".⁴⁴

The fact is that our concepts of love have been influenced more by the entertainment media than by experience. Many people have a make-believe concept of love that falls apart when put to the test and tension of day-to-day living.

Pat Clendinning wrote: "real love, mature love, comes about when I discover someone whose needs I want to meet, and whom I want to help meet my own needs".⁴⁵ This means that love is not something we fall into and fall out of. Actually we grow into love. Yet love has the potential to die. Stop and think about how you came to be "in Love" with the significant other in your life. Either in your first, or through association, you saw qualities in the person that appealed

to you. You responded in a positive manner to the person, and that led to further discoveries of qualities and characteristics you liked. As your positive attitude toward the person grew, love was born. It wasn't something you fell into, but an experience you grew into.

In the marriage context, there are three types of love, sensual, companionship and the giving love. These three types of love are usually identified with three Greek words: eros, philia and agape.

The first type, the sensual, is sexual love. It is inspired by the biological structure of human nature. It has its foundation in the physical urge which seeks fulfillment in sexual union. A good marriage does not exist long without it. The husband and wife in a good marriage will love each other erotically and sensuously. This involves more than just sexual intercourse. It includes all the loving expressions of our maleness and femaleness. H. Norman Wright described eros love as : "the lingering touch of the fingers; the deep kiss; candle and music at dinner; the I promise you 'wink'; a low whistle when she models a new dress; giving her a sheer negligee for her birthday; wearing it for him that night".⁴⁶

The second type of love, companionship, is expressed in the delight and joy experienced in each other's company. We were created with a need for companionship. In the beginning God saw that it was not good for man to be alone.⁴⁷ Companionship love includes the sharing of common goals and interests. It means that the husband and wife "like" each

other as well as love each other. They express this love by doing things together as well as just being together. While eros is almost a face-to-face relationship, philia is very often a shoulder-to-shoulder relationship.⁴⁸

The third and highest form of love is a giving love. Agape love is gift-love. It is not just something that happens to you, but something you make happen. It is not a love that reacts, but acts. It is not a whim of the emotions, but an act of the will. It is the giving of yourself to another, not because the person to whom you give yourself is deserving or responds to you in a positive way, but because you choose to give. This is the love that goes on loving even when the one loved is not acting lovable. It is not feeling love, but doing love. Rick Yohn described how the ancient Greeks used this word agape: "(Agape) included the emotions but was not limited by them. It included a natural affection but even when it was not natural to love, Agape loved anyway. This love provided an excellent basis for companionship, but it transcended that phase if the companion failed to love in return."⁴⁹

Agape love is the love patterned after Christ's love for us.⁵⁰ This kind of gift-love, or giving love, is the only love that can hold a marriage together over the years. When a couple ceases freely to give to each other, companionship sours and sensual love become an exercise in exploitation.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LOVE

Having given a definition on love, there are at least seven characteristics of love in marriage. The order in which they are presented is not to be taken as a ranking in order of importance but as a way of looking at one object from seven different vantage points.

First, marital love is a responsiveness to the total self of the person loved. Our personhood is expressed spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. Marital love recognizes the diversity of one's being and responds positively to all facets of that being. For example, a husband is to love his wife's body, but at the same time respect and treasure the personality represented by that body.

Second, in marital love one is to think more of the happiness of one's mate than of one's self. People are not to marry to find happiness, but to give it. Happiness is not the purpose of marriage, but it surely can be the result of a good marriage. The husband's primary desire should be the happiness of his wife, and the wife's main goal should be the happiness of her husband. When this is true in marriage, neither partner loses. But when each is seeking to gain happiness rather than to give it, both can lose.

Third, in marital love mates accept responsibility for each other's needs. Men and women obviously bring needs to marriage. Even though some of our need-expectancy may be

unrealistic, other needs are legitimate and should be met.

Someone has said that our most basic need is to love and to be loved. A healthy marriage, therefore, is one in which both partners recognize the need of each to be loved and valued, and then allow each to love the other in return. When mates have the degree of love that willingly accepts another's needs as a personal responsibility, and willingly gives to meet them, neither partner ends up left out.

Fourth, husband and wives who love each other as they should know joy in each other's company and experience pain in separation. Mates who have a maturing love for each other enjoy being together, and feel that a part of themselves is missing when they are separated. Marriage was God's answer to Man's aloneness in the beginning.⁵¹ It results in a togetherness that not only completes one's personhood, but also provides enjoyable companionship.

Fifth, marital love involves mutual enjoyment that is expressed. In marriage a husband and wife become "one flesh".⁵² One aspect of your physical union, however, should be the expressed delight in each other's bodies.

Sixth, marital love is positive in attitude. Instead of looking for faults in another, it magnifies virtues. Your love isn't to be blind in that it does not see imperfections in your mate, but it is to be kind in that it does not dwell on them.

Finally, in marital love there is a feeling of belonging. Marriage is a commitment of two lives to each other. In that commitment the husband and wife say to each other, "I

now belong to you". That commitment becomes a feeling of belonging that makes life for you a duet, not a solo experience.

DEVELOPING YOUR LOVE

People who love plants are very much aware that plants are living things and their health and growth are dependent upon daily care and attention. It is said that the reason plants respond to being talked to kindly is because of the carbon dioxide expelled in the breath when one talks to them. In other words, by talking to a plant a person gives something of themselves that nurtures the plant. In a similar way, love grows and blossoms like a beautiful plant as we continue to do things that nourish it. Each couple should discover and develop unique and special ways to do this.

One of which, is to speak your love to one another. This is common for couples to do in the courtship period of their relationship, and should be even more so after the wedding. The couple who assumes that each knows how the other feels, thus dispensing with verbal affirmations of love, is playing the fool. Love wants to be told what love already knows.

Second, show little courtesies. Again it is commonplace in courtship for couples to be courteous and gracious towards each other. There is nothing in the wedding ceremony that says this is to end with "I do". After all, it was these

little things that endeared you to your mate. The continuation of them after marriage is even more necessary because they ease the tensions marriage can generate.

Third, make time for togetherness. Life makes it's demands on husbands and wives and usually in an increasing degree as they grow older. For him it is the demands of business coupled with church and civic responsibilities. For her it is the church, home, children and social obligations.

A man's business is important. It is by means of it that he provides for the material of his family. But his relationship to his wife is more important. The children can be demanding in terms of time and energy and leave a wife feeling washed out physically and mentally, at the end of the day. But in a definite way the husband is more important than the children. One day the children will be grown and gone and he will be all that she will have and vice-versa.

Finding time together often calls for creative planning, but it can be done. Furthermore, the quantity of time involved is as important as the quality. It is both how much time you have together and how well you use it.

Fourth, maintain personal attractiveness. Even though we can put too much emphasis on physical appearance, in many cases it was the cause for your initial attraction to the one you love. It is a fact that how one dresses and looks is not only a reflection of what the person thinks of themselves, but what they think of those who have to look at them.

Finally, accentuate the positive in your mate. In courtship the average couple puts the best foot forward and does their best to conceal their less commendable characteristics, but marriage has a way of opening closed closets, or closing open closets. It is very easy for mates to begin to focus on these flaws. Such excessive negativism will sour your relationship and can eventually strangle your love.

Wise is the couple who expresses gratitude and continues to look for the best in each other daily. Everyone has both strong and weak points. Magnify the strong while minimizing the weak. Remember love is a positive response to another person, not a negative one. If you are to grow in your life of love you must continually accentuate the positive and eliminate the negatives.

SUMMARY

This paper has attempted to deal with matters that are vital in making a happy marriage. Whether you will have one or not is dependent on a number of factors about you, your mate, how compatible you are, and the expectations you bring to marriage.

There were several purposes in mind for offering this guideline. First, since the wedding ceremony formally and officially begins the adventure of making a marriage, this guideline was written for couples who are planning to launch out in that venture.

Secondly, it was written for those who have already

said, "I do". This is not intended to be a marriage manual, but I believe it can be used by a couple to help and guide in their determination to make a marriage happy.

Thirdly, this guide is offered as a help to pastors for use in pre-marital counseling. The material can be adapted to a ministers own counseling approach, or it can be used as a study guide in dealing with couples.

With these purposes in mind this guide has been offered. As already indicated, it is by no means the final or most definitive word on the subject. However, what I have written is factually based and documented, and it also reflects the wisdom and understanding gained through study and by being exposed to both the best and the worst in marriages.

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